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ABSTRACT

The link between increased education for women and decreased fertility has become a central part of development discourse. To explore this relationship, a three-and-a-half-month research project examined the qualitative aspects of why and how education for girls could lead to a change in fertility behavior. Specifically, the report here offers a more rigorous understanding of the role that education plays within the community. Data were collected at the local level, in both rural and urban settings, and included focus group discussions, life histories, and in-depth interviews. Results show that schooling is valued not for the basic skills it provides, but for the jobs that students, and their families, anticipate upon graduation. Decreasing job opportunities contribute to perceptions that the time spent learning to read and write is time better spent at home. Girls, in particular, face inappropriate curriculums, low pass rates, and cultural restrictions, such as pressures to marry around the age of 12 and to work in the home. Parents feared that ideas taught in school clashed with local culture and they worried that their girls might become pregnant due to school association, ironically linking schooling with increased fertility. Contains 14 references. (RJM)

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"Factors Affecting Girls' Access to Schooling in Niger"

Final Report to ODA Education Division

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Executive Summary

Introduction

This report is based on a three and a half month research study in Niger involving interviews with government officials at the local and national levels, NGO's, and qualitative data collection at the local level, in both rural and urban settings, including focus group discussions, life histories and in-depth interviews. The main objective of the study was to explore the qualitative aspects of why and how education for girls could lead to a change in fertility behaviour.

Since the link between increased education for women and decreased fertility was first made in Cochrane's 1979 study, the relationship has become a central part of the development discourse. The relationship is now widely accepted as causal and figures largely in the synergistic approaches to development programming. In reality, there is little in the form of qualitative evidence to illuminate or support this hypothesis. This study set out to develop a more rigorous understanding of the relationship between education, the role that it plays within the community, and its potential influence on fertility.

Background

Niger presents a particularly interesting case study of the education and fertility relationship because of its very poor education system and its fertility rate of 7.4. The country has a literacy rate of 14% (9% for females) and an overall primary school enrolment rate of 28.5%. Only 36% of this figure are girls; in rural areas female enrolment drops as low as 10%. Clearly Niger's education system is suffering from a number of debilitating constraints. A quick review of the country's recent political and economic history accounts for the very poor national education infrastructure, and the general strikes that have frequently drawn the country to a complete halt over the past five years have served to erode any belief that the schools will either be open or able to provide sufficient education for the students to pass the exams. Four out of the last six school years were cancelled due to time lost to strikes, and up until the middle of March, students had only received 14 days of education in the 1994-95 school year because of strikes.

Expectations of Formal Education

In addition to the problems of the education system itself is the question of how formal education is viewed by the local communities. In the course of conducting the qualitative surveys, it quickly became apparent that the school system is valued not for the basic skills it aims to provide for its students, but for the job that students, and their extended families, anticipate upon their graduation from university or professional school. The returns in the form of basic reading and writing skills, while recognised as useful, are

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simply not highly valued in the local communities. The overall levels of success in terms of passing the primary school exam and continuing on through the school system to university or professional school are very low. Most parents, particularly those in rural areas, have very low expectations of their children's ability to secure a civil servant position and are likely to view their time as better spent helping them in the fields or in the home. Moreover, with the increasing political and economic difficulties, and the recent announcement that the government could no longer guarantee civil service jobs to all graduates, people are becoming increasingly sceptical of the school curriculum's ability to provide their children with any valuable returns.

Female Education

For girls, the picture is even more bleak. In addition to problems of inappropriate curriculum, abysmally low pass rates and interruptions due to strikes, they are constrained by cultural norms which limit their activities outside of the home from an early age, encourage marriage around the age of 12, and which rely heavily on their labour within the home. Parents do not see the returns from primary school as sufficient to justify the loss of labour in the home. In addition, the widespread belief that school teaches girls modern ways which are in conflict with local behavioural norms and the fear that many girls become pregnant as a direct result of their association with the school makes parents, particularly mothers, very resistant to allowing them to even begin school. Years of failure to secure a job with the civil service on the part of those girls who did go to school, and lingering stories and rumours of pregnancies have created an atmosphere of quiet hostility towards the system.

In terms of education's effect on fertility and health, there is a widespread belief that educated girls are able to keep their children healthier and cleaner than those who did not attend school. Despite this, the risk is not seen as justified: pregnancy before marriage is viewed as extremely shameful for both the girl and her extended family. Under these conditions, the chances of them attaining the magic four years of primary school that might reduce their fertility are very slim indeed. Ironically, rather than looking upon education as a means of ensuring healthier families, the local belief is that school could actually contribute to increasing fertility.

Summary

While the population discourse assumes a direct and positive relation between primary education and decreased fertility, rarely has the impact of education in all of its forms been closely examined. In addition to exploring the disparities in perspective of the different values placed upon educational activities, this Nigerien based study explored the issues involved in the relationship between fertility and education. The results of the study will play a particularly important role in informing both curriculum and textbook initiatives for primary schools, as well as the larger scale

ODA projects and programmes concerned with the relationship between "children by choice" and wider health initiatives.

Education and Fertility in Niger

Education and Development in Niger

Research over the past thirty years has suggested that education increases quality of life through improving levels of nutrition and health, and reducing fertility. Despite the fact that the apparent link between increased levels of primary school education for girls and decreased levels of fertility, as first proposed by Cochrane in 1979, has yet to be explained or truly understood, the relationship is now widely accepted as causal. The fact that Niger has some of the worst education statistics in the world is attracting increasing attention from Nigeriens and the development community alike. The primary school enrolment rate in Niger for 1993-94 was 28.5%, and of this low number, only 36% were girls, mostly from urban areas; in the rural areas girls often make up as little as 10% of the enrolled pupils[1].

If the relationship is as influential as is anticipated, education will be particularly important for Nigerien girls, who become wives and mothers at a very young age: 75% of adolescent girls have at least one child[2]. Niger's vital health statistics are also among the worst in the world with maternal mortality rates of 700 per 100 000 and, perhaps the most startling indicator, an infant and child mortality rate of 326 per 1000 [3]. The overall levels of girls' education could have a direct impact upon the health and quality of life of their children and families.

Purpose of the Study

This study explored qualitative aspects of the relationship between formal education and decreased fertility, as well as factors which appear to confound it. In addition, the study investigated the influences that education systems outside the formal schools have on this relationship. Central to the study was the need to explore more profoundly the assumption that the level of girls' education could have a direct impact on total fertility rates. While the outcomes of the research are anticipated to have important policy implications for both primary school curriculum change and larger scale programme development, on a smaller and more immediate scale, the issue of understanding the synergy between education and fertility is central to Niger's future development; with a fertility rate of 7.4 live births per woman,

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[1] Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale de l'Enseignement Supérieur et de la Recherche. (1993) *Problématique de la Scolarisation des Filles au Niger.* Niamey, Niger.
[2] Kourgueni, Idrissa Alichina, Bassirou Garba and Bernard Barrere (eds.). (1992) *Enquête Demographique et de Santé Niger.* Columbia, Maryland: Macro International Inc.
[3] Ibid.

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the country's population is one of the most rapidly increasing in Sub-Saharan Africa and is set to double in 22 years[4].

Background

Beginning at the end of January 1995, this study was carried out over a period of three and a half months against a backdrop of strikes, protests, and political and economic unrest. Schools and health centres remained closed until the middle of March, although most health centres offered a minimum of emergency health care throughout the strikes. One of the central issues of the strike was salaries: most government employees had not been paid their salaries for anywhere from four to seven months. Elections had taken place in January, but, investigations into election rigging and the new majority's refusal to accept the President's choice of new Prime Minister prevented the National. Assembly from addressing the causes of the strikes until March. While government employees have returned to work, continuing demonstrations and day-long strikes, particularly on the part of secondary and university students, threaten to force the government into cancelling the 1994-95 school year. If this were to happen it would be the fourth cancellation of a school year due to time lost over salary disputes in the past six years.

While these problems and issues retain a prominent position on the daily agenda of those living in the capital of Niamey, the 85% of the population that live in rural areas must incorporate their responses to change in a manner complimentary to the routines dictated by seasonal and cultural cycles. In addition to data collected at the national level, six weeks were spent at the village level attempting to gauge the degree of impact and reaction to those issues from the rural perspective.

Research Methods

The first three weeks were spent contacting government officials in the Ministries of Health and Education. Key individuals were interviewed with regard to the current state of affairs, new programmes, future plans for change, and the impact of the strikes on the government's ability to provide health care or primary school education. Key individuals in the donor community were also interviewed regarding current projects, plans for the future and for reactions to the impact of the strike upon both their own projects and on Niger's ability to respond to increasing health and environmental pressures. Agencies and organisations contacted include the World Bank, USAID, GTZ, CIDA, the Family Health and Demography Project (funded by USAID), the condom social marketing project SOMARC, CARE International, UNICEF, and the International Women's Club Education Project.

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[4] Ministère du Développement Social, de la Population et de la Femme. (1994) *Population et Développement au Niger: Un Appel á l'Action*. Niamey, Niger.

The second phase of the research study was primarily spent in two villages in the eastern department of Zinder over a period of six weeks. The Hausa villages of Roufao and Doungou were selected on the basis of their proximity to both a dispensary and a primary school. The village of Doungou has a population of approximately 2000, and has both a school and dispensary in the village. It also has a small pharmacy and a representative from the Agricultural Extension service living in the village. The district capital of Matameye is 17 kilometres away down a very poor gravel road. Roufao is the smaller of the two villages with approximately 1000 inhabitants. Residents must walk three kilometres to the village of Dan Barto to go to the dispensary or primary school. Dan Barto is situated on the main, paved road from Kano, Nigeria to Zinder, and is five kilometres from the border. The district capital of Matameye is approximately 30 kilometres down the main road.

The research team consisted of myself and two Nigerien women who participated at all levels of the research process both as interpretors and research assistants. The research began with a broad-based investigation of the villages' resources, perceptions of local problems and challenges, and then focused on the issues of family planning and primary school education. Focus group formats were used, working with the same groups of older fathers, younger fathers, older mothers and younger mothers over several discussion sessions. Following the focus group discussions, individuals were identified for in-depth interviews. Life histories were recorded with women who had received some primary school education, and, in order to gain an understanding of the male perspective, their husbands were also interviewed. Women who had begun to use family planning methods were also identified and asked to participate in in-depth interviews. Friendships were developed with several individuals in both villages, and these individuals played important roles as key informants. In Doungou the nurse running the local dispensary, the guard of our compound and one of the older mothers were invaluable in discussing issues in depth and clarifying details. In the Roufao/Dan Barto area, the head nurse of the dispensary and the guard of our compound fulfilled the same role. In addition, village chiefs, local marabouts, traditional mid-wives, local health staff and school directors were interviewed. Following the work in the villages, government officials at the Department level were asked to respond to an outline of the initial findings.

For comparative purposes the focus group format was repeated in the predominately Hausa district of Zongo in the capital of Niamey. Groups of older and younger men, and older and younger women were interviewed using the same question outlines developed during the village interviews. Individual women were then identified for in-depth interviews regarding their experience of primary school education and/or acceptance of family planning methods. School directors at the two local schools and health staff at the dispensary were also interviewed.

Following data collection in local communities, visits were again made to the government officials dealing with education and family planning.

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Individuals responsible for developing and supporting initiatives to increase levels of primary education or family planning were asked to respond to a summary of the initial findings both as members of their respective ministries and as individuals. Interviews were also conducted with additional NGO's and key informants including locally-based women's groups and an organisation of female teachers working to raise the level of girls' enrolment in primary school through awareness-raising activities and supporting alternative informal educational opportunities for girls and women.

RESULTS

Recruitment Malaise

The initial reason individuals in the rural areas give for the low enrolment rates, for both boys and girls, is that the children have not been recruited or "convoked" by the head teacher of the local. The system of recruitment for primary school in rural Niger is ineffectual and relies on the motivation of local school head teachers. In theory, at the beginning of each school year, head teachers consult the local birth registers, identify a list of all seven year old children in both the school village and surrounding villages, and then announce the names of the children either themselves or via the village chief. They should also consult village leaders to identify any children not on the birth register. There are many problems with the system, as the school inspector from Matameye described:

> We go to the birth registers. Every childs' name should normally be on the village registrations, so we refer to that and take those of 6, 7, or 8 years of age and invite the parents to bring their children. But what has happened now is that since the parents know that if their children's names are on the village registration they will be recruited sooner or later, so now the parents don't declare their children. So now most of the time children's names don't even exist on paper.

The two rural school head teachers I spoke to rarely travelled to villages outside their own to recruit. They cited lack of transport and the knowledge that villagers outside of the school village would be unlikely to be interested in sending their children to school as reasons for not casting a wider recruitment net. They stated that when they do go to villages in the catchment area, parents of children are often aggressive, refusing outright to send their children to school, or going to great lengths to keep their child's name off the recruitment list. The head teacher from Doungou told us:

> Yes, there are [no children attending this school] from these villages - they don't like school at all. It is their parents' fault.

> Parents in these areas are hostile, wallahi!...Very often they have answers such as "she got married", "he or she is not living in this village", "I sent him or her to another village", "he or she died"; even when we know nothing has happened to the children!

While they were sympathetic to their rural peers' problems, those head teachers interviewed in the urban areas were far less likely to cite any type of difficulty in recruiting school children, boys or girls. In Niamey announcements are made on the radio and parents bring their children to the schools to enrol. Wilkey-Merritt reported in her study for UNICEF that: "In urban areas where many children are the sons and daughters of [government employees] who know the economic power of education, competition for places in primary school is keen.[5]" She goes on to explain how wealthier parents are able to gain an advantage in getting their children into the available school vacancies:

> ...if a child has attended pre-school or kindergarten (préscolaire, jardin d'enfants) s/he has priority for acceptance into CI [grade one]. Although the [Ministry of Education] has regulations and inspectors for pre-schools, because this level is considered a luxury for the public school system, it is not offered to parents without cost. Because parents must pay a substantial fee (in Aguié 6000 CFA per term) it is almost exclusively the elite who send their children (who, in turn, have priority for acceptance into the highly competitive CI).[6]

This would indicate that those children who do manage to secure a place in the system are more likely to come from the wealthier households of government employees.

Reviewing the Statistics

It is difficult to provide any type of indication of just how many children are recruited into the first year of school because of the lack of adequate, reliable statistics. In theory, the relevant numbers should be recorded in each school and be sent on to the education office at the district level, where they will be forwarded to the department level and eventually to the ministry in the capital. However, while the numbers may be duly noted in the classroom, they are not always forwarded. Even if the figures do manage to reach the ministry level for inclusion in national surveys, the expertise required for the analysis is lacking; stacks of books with figures recorded sit unprocessed in the cupboards of ministry offices at all levels of government. In the course of a discussion about the government's ability to produce statistics, a statistician hired from Tulane University by USAID to work with the Ministry of Public Health's statistics office, Dr. Mike Edwards, commented to me that he would

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[5] Wilkey-Merritt, Marilyn (1994) *Advancing Education and Literacy in Niger: Observations, Reflections and Recommendations.* Niamey, Niger: UNICEF. p23.
[6] Ibid, p24.

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Table I: The Number of Children Attending Primary School in Urban Areas of Niger (Ministère de l'Education Nationale, 1993)

Department	1992-93			1993-94		
	boys	girls	total	boys	girls	total
Agadez	1736	1373	3109	1824	1446	3270
Diffa	391	330	721	530	381	911
Dosso	1478	1139	2617	1363	1212	2575
Maradi	2093	1362	3455	2384	1427	3811
Niamey	6803	6680	13483	7202	7092	14494
Tahoua	10937	1242	3179	2066	1422	3488
Tillabery	954	797	1751	1024	797	1821
Zinder	1830	1394	3224	2037	1519	3556
Total	17222	14317	31539	18430	15296	33726
Rate	54.60 %	45.40%	100%	54.64%	45.36%	100%

Table II: The Numbers of Children attending Primary School in Rural Areas of Niger (Ministère de l'Education Nationale, 1993)

	1992-93			1993-94		
Department	boys	girls	total	boys	girls	total
Agadez	496	232	728	548	293	841
Diffa	563	380	943	655	419	1074
Dosso	5244	2149	7393	6273	2699	8972
Maradi	6068	1842	7910	5556	2048	7604
Niamey	–	–	–	–	–	–
Tahoua	6076	1951	8027	6585	2282	8867
Tillabery	5371	3896	9267	5987	6487	12474
Zinder	4092	2139	6231	4301	2259	6560
Total	27910	12589	40499	29905	16487	46392
Rate	68.92%	31.08%	100%	64.47%	35.53%	100%

Because there is no reliable indicator of how many children are of school age, it is difficult to gauge what percentage are actually attending school. The 1992 Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) stated that, based on its own survey results (as opposed to figures collected from the government),18.2% of children between the ages of seven and 12 were estimated to be attending school[8]. Once again the differences between urban and rural areas are marked, as are differences between girls and boys. (see Table III).

Table III: The Percentage of Children Between the Ages of 7 and 12 Attending School (Kourgeni, et. al, (1992) Demographic and Health Survey).

	Urban (%)	Rural (%)	Total (%)
Boys	54.8	16.8	23.1
Girls	44.7	7.1	13.5
Total	49.6	11.9	18.2

Levels of attendance would no doubt be higher in urban areas if they were not limited by the number of places available in the schools. The double vacation scheme was introduced in 1992 in order to increase the capacity of the schools to educate more children. The scheme is, however, unpopular with parents who feel that the quality of education is inferior.

The History of Fear of Recruitment in Rural Areas

During the post-colonial days of the early 1960's, the Nigerien government was anxious to establish a system of education quickly to produce the intellectual elite needed to support the newly independent country. In order to ensure sufficient numbers within the system, the army was sent to the villages to carry children off to school. Parents, terrified that their children were being sent to their death, would send the children to hide in the bush until the army had left. Two young fathers in the village of Roufao told us:

> **First Father:** More children go to school today because of open-mindedness. Before people suffered from ignorance. Open-mindedness is brought by the change in times. Before people would run away from normal school.

[8] Kourgeni, et. al. (1992) p24.

Second Father: Before, our grandfathers hid our parents if someone came to recruit the children for school. They used to hide the children and say that they had no children.

Despite this talk of "open-mindedness", the fear of school recruitment continues today, and situations similar to the one recounted by the head teacher in Doungou earlier seem to occur with regularity. Parents are willing to go to great lengths to avoid sending a child to school and, as the following excerpt demonstrates, after a few of these experiences, school head teachers begin to fall into a system of recruiting only those they know will come to school.

Question: *How many children are attending school from outside of Doungou?*

Head teacher: No pupils come to the school from surrounding villages; all our students come from Doungou. They used to come for a while, but they stopped a long time ago.

Question: *Do you recruit children from the smaller villages outside Doungou?*

Head teacher: We only have Koré and Doungou-Bugaye under our control. They are the two villages allowed to bring their children to Doungou for schooling, and as they didn't answer the very first invitations to bring their children to school, we no longer send them.

Question: *What about the smaller villages? Do you recruit there?*

Head teacher: They don't come here at all. Even when we used to send invitations, we had no children from those villages.

Question: *But you don't send invitations.*

Head teacher: That's right we don't.

Question: *Why are you convinced that even if you did send invitations, the children won't come?*

Head teacher: Because those [head teachers] who served here before me in this area sent invitations over and over, but they had no children from these places.

For the most part, it is the children of government employees working in the area who are recruited, along with children in the immediate school

village. Of the girls who did attend the school in Doungou, all lived in households of government employees. If additional children from outlying villages arrive asking to attend school, they are not turned away, but instances of children willing to walk several kilometres a day to attend school, without being recruited, are rare.

This cycle of reluctance on the part of parents, lack of access to schools and poor recruitment on the part of school head teachers denies young village children even the initial opportunity to begin school. In the case of the village of Roufao, I found that the head teacher had stopped putting any girls' names on the recruitment list at the request of the village elders. Because girls from the village had never "succeeded", the elders felt it unnecessary to waste anymore time trying. Neither the head teacher nor the school inspector from Matameye seemed to think that this request was problematic or even out of the ordinary. When the inspector was asked to comment on the situation he responded:

> This is an arrangement between the teachers and the villagers. They live together and they make a kind of deal: "We will send you boys but don't send invitations for the girls." Here as an inspector, if we try to do something we will lose everything, including the boys.

The Concept of Success

The notion of "success" is a commonly cited reason for not sending girls to school. Success in this context means neither passing from one year to the next, nor achieving good grades. Rather, it refers to securing a position with the civil service upon completion of university or professional school. A young man in Doungou spoke quite frankly about the notion of "success":

> ...the only reason [villagers] don't like [sending their children to school] is because most children have failed and didn't succeed. Parents don't have civil servant children to give them money at the end of every month. The mother has to sell things, the father has to work in the fields. There is no benefit.

Outside of the civil service, there are few opportunities for paid employment; the economy is based, for the most part, in the informal sector with little formal, private sector to speak of. As the Head School Inspector in Zinder said: "We have to solve many problems; like job opportunities. Everybody can't find jobs in the government offices!" Until 1991, when automatic employment was stopped due to budgetary constraints, all students who completed professional school or university had been guaranteed a job with the civil service. Initially, completion of primary school was enough to qualify for a job with the government. Over the years the level

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of the qualification required has steadily increased, however, and now a professional qualification or degree is required. A young woman participating in the focus group in the Zongo district of Niamey commented:

> Because after 6 years of education you can't do anything. Even after 10 years you can't get a job-now. So people think that going to school is a waste of time.

Success in terms of passing through the school system (which is based on the French model) is rare; for girls it is even more elusive. In 1989 of the 2760 students who performed well enough on the exam to move from the *collège* (junior secondary) level onto the *lycée* (senior secondary) level, only 23% were girls and, of the 1479 who passed the *baccalauréat* exam, only 22% were girls [9]. At the senior secondary school level, boys out-number girls four to one, and at the university level, women make up only one percent of the population.

With austerity programmes proposed by the World Bank and the IMF (which have yet to be fully implemented) and increasing economic difficulties, these life-long government positions are becoming even more difficult to secure. The international donor community is continuing to ask Niger to decrease the size of its civil service, and Prime Minister Hama Amadou was forced to publicly re-iterate in a speech to the National Assembly in April that the country could no longer guarantee civil service positions to all university or professional school graduates. The government simply does not have the means to pay its employees as it stands; it is impossible for them to take on anymore.

Outcomes versus Needs

This definition of success is central to understanding the crucial lack of accord between what the education system offers and what the population requires to improve its present economic and social situation. Firstly, it demonstrates that the anticipated benefit from education is viewed primarily in terms of the final product: financial security in the form of a job in the civil service. In essence, the school system is viewed as training individuals to be civil servants, conditioned to work in an urban office setting. In Niamey, those who fail to pass their exams are referred to as "school garbage" because they are often seen as unable, or unwilling, to do any work other than in offices.

While the salaries of the civil service have been less than reliable in the past five years, it can be argued that the position itself gives individuals access to a number of opportunities to increase financial security, whether it is through bribes, connections to others with power and influence, or other creative means of income generation. The education system is only seen as

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[9] Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale de l'Enseignement Supérieur et de la Recherche. (1993) *Problématique de la Scolarisation des Filles au Niger*. Niamey, Niger.

being "successful" when the student graduates and secures the job that will take him or, rarely, her[10] out of the village with its traditional values and into the city with its modern lifestyle.

There is a general recognition, however, that if a person learns to read and write, it is not a bad thing. An olser man in the Roufao focus group commented:

> Even those who didn't succeed have a benefit from the little bit they got with reading and writing. They can shoo away ignorance and they have a certain open-mindedness.

But for the most part it is the salaried position that is anticipated. During an interview, the husband of a woman who had been to primary school explained that he was not yet benefiting from his sons' education because they were still at the primary level:

> To speak of benefits, the children have to succeed and get a job. With the money they get from the job they can help their parents, themselves, their relatives.

As a member of a closely-knit community network, the coveted job represents increased economic security not just for the individual, but for the entire extended family, and perhaps even the village. As one man in the older mens' discussion group in Niamey commented:

> The first benefit [of schooling] is to succeed. If you succeed you can serve your country, you support yourself, you support your parents, your neighbours.

Expectations of Success: Girls versus Boys

This definition of success directly affects initial enrolment rates. It is widely understood that few children will be able to advance beyond the primary level. Parents see that ,year after year, those children who have gone to school fail the Primary School Certificate exam, if not earlier. Few have any expectation of their children succeeding. I heard many stories from disgruntled villagers who claimed that either their children or they themselves had been cheated out of a passing grade in the primary exam, asserting that the passing grades were sold to government employees' children. When we asked a focus group of younger women why girls from the village did not seem to do very well in the primary exams, they explained that even if the child did succeed, her name would be taken from the list of those who had passed the exam and replaced with the name of a government employee's child who had failed the exam. One older woman in the focus group in Roufao said:

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[10] In an interview, Madame Eugenie Salifou, former Director of Primary School Education, stated that of the 42 840 civil servants, only 7 370 or 17% are women.

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> The teachers from Dan Barto are the ones who take their names off the list.
>
> ***Question:** Why would they do that?*
>
> It's wickedness. Because they don't want them to go forward in their studies. They say that we are villagers.
>
> Even in Dan Barto, no one from the village has succeeded. Of those who have succeeded, it is the daughters of the civil servants, like the police chief's daughters and the teacher's daughters. But no girl from the village has succeeded!

Whether there is any truth to these accusations or not, the fact is villagers believe that their children's chances of succeeding are very slim indeed.

Returning to the Statistical Indicators

A document of December 1993 from the Ministry of Education uses the statistics of those who passed the Primary School Certificate Exam in the 1988-1989 school year as its most recent indicators: 11 857 received the certificate, 8620 of those were boys and 3237, or 27%, were girls[11]. The report does not supply the number of children who actually sat the exam, and while in an interview a ministry official stated that those numbers were available, they were never produced. The Plan of Action resulting from the Jomtien Conference on Education for All also makes a fleeting reference to the poor performance of Nigerien students in the primary education years. It states that the success rates of the exams have noticeably decreased over ten years, with a drop-out rate of approximately 52% over the six year cycle[12]. Once again no indication of the numbers of students attempting the exam are provided. The World Bank presents an equally bleak picture of opportunities for success in a recent report:

> The quality of education in Niger is poor as evidenced by low internal efficiency and low examination pass rates at all levels. Low quality is reflected in repetition rates of 3-16% in grades one through five, and 42% in grade six. More than 40% of pupils drop out prior to grade six, and the pass rate at the leaving examination averaged only 29% over the last five years.[13]

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[11] Ibid, p 4.
[12] Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale et de la Recherche (1992) *Éducation de Base Pour Tous- Plan d'Action National*. Niamey, Niger. p10.
[13] World Bank. (1994) *Report and Recommendation for a Basic Education Sector Report*. Niamey, Niger. p6.

Female Failures

The distinction between boys and girls is important. Villagers have long memories and, despite the high failure rates, there is always a story of at least one boy from the village who has "succeeded". Whether he is a teacher, nurse, policeman or customs officer, the role models are available for the boys. For the girls it is different; of those few girls who do succeed nationally, most are urban. This lack of role models in rural areas is used as further justification for not sending the girls to school. The husband of a woman with primary education explained the difference between the benefits of education for girls and boys:

> Only boys advance in their schooling. No girls advance. Among our women, none of them has a job in the city or has money to help her parents and herself. In our village there has been a school for many years. The difference is, in our village, no girl has succeeded in school; no girl has got a job with the government. But everyone knows that boys have succeeded, they have money and are helping their parents and relatives. There is no female government employee from Doungou helping her parents and relatives with what she gained as a civil servant!

In fact, those rural women who have attended school for a few years are regarded as failures and are held up as examples of the fruitlessness of schooling for girls. This same man commented on his experience of being married to a woman who had been to school:

> I see no difference between my educated wife and the others' uneducated wives. I would have seen a difference if she had succeeded and had some money from her job. At that time the money would make the difference between her and other women. Now, she does nothing. She's always just sitting there....Her, no one calls her "Madame" and she's not being paid by the government!

He went on to concede that her education was helpful because it had given her the ability to read a little bit, and because she took the children to the dispensary. These benefits seemed to have little bearing on his decision to "never" send his girls to school.

Avoiding Shame

Parents assume that girls who go to school, in addition to wasting their time, are exposed to "modern ways" of living. These ways are not condemned outright; if an individual succeeds in school and can use the modern ways and modern life to support the family, then the ways are acceptable. They become problematic when the individual fails and tries to

carry the new behaviours and opinions back into traditional life. The group of older men of Roufao used the example of the problem of pregnancies to explain their point:

> If the girl is not succeeding and having babies without a father [it is a problem]. But she can have her babies without the father if she is succeeding, because the job she will get later will help her support the baby without a father. But in the village it's a shame...It's worrying if the girl has a baby without a father and she comes back to the village!

For the most part, the "modern ways" refer to the girls' behaviour and its potential effect on their fertility. Within Nigerien society, a woman's opportunities to gain status or achieve any kind of security are limited. Perhaps most important to a woman's ability to secure a future for herself is her fertility. As a girl enters into puberty, this fertility must be guarded. The adolescent or pre-adolescent girl is at a difficult stage: she is too young to be trusted to behave appropriately, to keep her sexuality hidden and to avoid getting into trouble with the weak male who may fall victim to her charms. For the parents and family, the adolescent girl has the potential to bring a great deal of trouble to the family. When asked what happens when a girl gets pregnant at school, one younger man explained:

> Everyone laughs at her and insults her. They call her an imbecile. It's a problem for the whole family: father, mother, grandfather. Every time they try to talk to their friends, people will say "Don't listen to them, they are stupid. They let their daughter get pregnant and she's not married!

Should she get pregnant before marriage, the girl will shame the family, be forced to have a child out of wedlock, and will have a difficult time finding a man who will marry her, thereby remaining a burden upon her family for a longer period of time. In order to avoid such difficulties, in the average Hausa village, girls are married around the age of twelve.

Thus, a problem with primary education is that it not only "holds" girls in school until they are fourteen, but it also exposes them to increased risk. Once parents see that their daughters are getting near puberty, if the girls are in school, they will try to get them out. A young man from Roufao explains:

> Even if the girl is brilliant, the parents go and beg the teacher to allow the girl to be married. If the teacher agrees she can be married. But if he refuses, she continues in her studies....Sometimes there are teachers who say no, but unfortunately the girls do not succeed anyway. Most of the time they fail the primary exam.

While attending school, the girls will be spending a great deal of time around boys who could take advantage of them, and, perhaps more threatening, the girls will be under the responsibility of a male teacher who

will have ample time to take advantage of his position of authority. The girls are at the same time learning modern ideas that conflict with the local belief system. Where every village has a story of a boy who has succeeded, they also have a story of a girl who has come back from school pregnant. The following excerpt from an interview with a woman who went to primary school demonstrates that, despite the fact that the basic benefits of reading and writing are recognised, the risk of pregnancy is just too much for the parents, specifically the mothers, to take:

> School helps a lot because the girls know how to read and write and count. They can read their letters themselves, and no one can know their secrets. Primary school gives them good manners...At school you learn to analyse the situation and decide if it is good or bad.
>
> ***Question:*** *If school does all these things, why don't you want your daughters to go to school?*
>
> (She laughs) Yes, I know. I recognise that school has its benefits. School didn't harm me at all! But the fact is, I didn't get any school success, and I have never seen another woman from this village who has succeeded. We *can't* send our girls to school - no woman has ever succeeded - *we can't!*
>
> ***Question:*** *Who or what says you can't?*
>
> We mothers decided that our girls shouldn't go to school....
>
> ***Question:*** *If your sons don't pass, is that a failure as well?*
>
> It's a failure for boys, but it's more of a failure for girls because they grow older and become pregnant. And yourself, you know that being pregnant without being married is a very bad thing. As for boys, everything is easier, because even if they fail they help their fathers in the farms and gardens. They are used to it; they do it in the three month vacations. So if they fail, it's no problem.

The longer the girl stays in school, the more she is at risk. Most parents are planning to get their daughters married about the time the girls should be writing their primary school exams. Those who have managed to stay in school until that stage are strongly discouraged from passing the exam. For the most part it appears it is the mothers who insist on putting a stop to the girls' educational endeavours. The instructor of a local literacy group explained the difficulties:

> The mothers are the ones who discourage them. They say "Look at that one, she got pregnant and came back [from Matameye]", or "That one is going to get married", or "That

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> one is married". They say "How long have we had a school? Can you show me a girl who has succeeded? Come now and be married!" Sometimes, beginning at the third or fourth year of primary school, some mothers start allowing boys to start courting their daughters. The girls listen to their mothers and take it into account. Sometimes in an exam, girls will write nothing; they will just hand in a blank paper to the teacher. It is the mothers who put bad ideas in their heads, even before they write the exam.

Students are allowed to attempt the primary exam twice. In most cases children attempt first at the age of 12 or 13, and then again at 13 or 14. These primary exam years are a crucial turning point not just because of the age of the girls, but also because success at this level most often means that the girl will have to move away to the district capital of Matameye to continue in school. She will be out of her parents watchful eyes, perhaps living with strangers, being exposed to even more modern ideas and at a greater risk of getting pregnant.

The Marriage Market

Ironically, despite the fact that parents worry about their daughters' reputation, and quite clearly do not value the content of the curriculum, young men seem to be beginning to think differently. After hearing so much from the mothers about how education negatively affected their daughter's opportunities, we conducted a mini-survey of what younger men were looking for in a wife; at least five men were interviewed in each village and in Niamey. When asked what they considered desirable qualities in a wife, many young men stated that they thought a few years of education were a good thing . One young man said:

> Girls who have been to school get married more easily. It helps a lot if men know that a girl has been to school. They will rush to her door because everyone wants her as a wife.
>
> ***Question:** Even if she has failed her exams?*
>
> Yes...Because educated girls are clean. They take care of themselves.

One young male went so far as to say that "a woman who has been to school has a voice which soothes her husband". Women who have not been to school, on the other hand, are perceived as dirtier, less well behaved and less likely to use the health centres.

The role of Koranic school in a girl's education did not have the same effect as primary school. While most boys and girls have gone to Koranic

schools at least long enough to learn how to pray, young men seemed to think that Koranic schools did not change the overall desirability of girls:

> [The girl who goes to Koranic school] has no problems. But the girl who goes to primary school is more civilised than the one who only went to Koranic school. Among the girls, the ones that went to Koranic school, its not her concern to be clean, because when she goes to Koranic school the marabout won't scold her and tell her to go back home and take a bath. But the one who went to primary school, every morning before going to school, she takes a bath. She can't go without taking a bath. If she goes to school dirty, the teacher will ask her, "Why do you come to school dirty?"

It is important to note, however, that for their first marriage[14], young men and women have very little say in who or when they marry. Ultimately it is the parents and extended families who make the decision and, in the girl's case, her mother is arguably the most influential in the process.

In contrast to the younger men were the opinions of older men married to women who had been educated for several years. While they conceded that their wives were in fact more hygienic and did manage to have healthier children for the most part, they still clearly felt that the time in school was a waste of effort. Although in the course of discussions with older men in Niamey the role of religion was more likely to be invoked as having a direct influence on decisions, comments from their focus group in Niamey closely echoed the opinions voiced in the villages:

> We don't want our girls to be away in school. We want them to get married early. But boys can go as far in school as they want.
>
> ***Question:*** *Why do you want your daughters to be married early?*
>
> It's because of our religion. We are Muslim. We want our girls to be pure before getting married. We don't want them to be spoiled [get pregnant]....If they stay in school they will grow old and it will be hard to find them husbands.

Most of these men stated that if and when their daughters were old enough to go to school, they would not be sending them.

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[14] The DHS survey states that 23% of women between the ages of 20 and 24 have been married at least twice, and by the time they reach the 45-49 age group, 42% have been married at least twice. This would indicate that, for many women, their first marriage is unlikely to be their only marriage.

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the underpinning structure can hope to offer the type of support needed to address basic questions of motivation and supervision. Changing this situation will depend on wholesale reform of the government and the national economy; something that is not going to happen for some time. In fact, many of the international organisations working in Niger are of the opinion that Niger's situation is going to get worse before it gets better. Ultimately Niger, both in terms of its government and those individuals who act within the government and communities, has to begin to take responsibility and initiative of its own accord. Any type of recommendation or programme for improvement must come from the thoughts, ideas and visions of Nigeriens themselves. Until this happens attempts to reform and change will continue to fall far short of expectations.

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